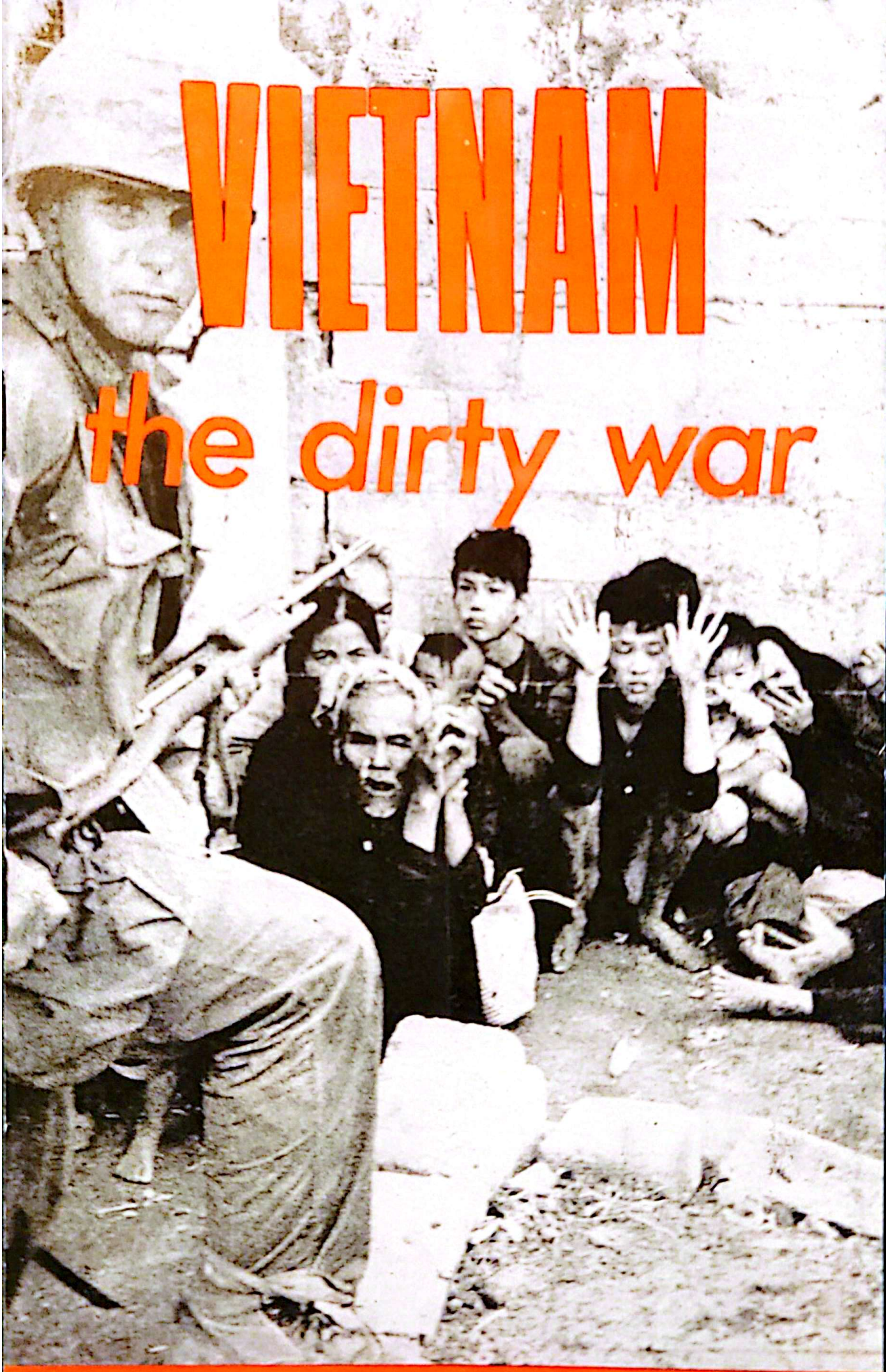
VIETNAM

the dirty war



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INTRODUCTION

IN SPITE OF THE increasing number of books and articles on Vietnam, it is very hard to get a clear picture of what it is really like to live in South Vietnam today. Casualty figures percolate through the official statistics in the form of "Viet Cong killed" and "structures destroyed." Foreign correspondents, especially American correspondents, are under pressure to accept and pass on the official version of events.*

In this situation French newspapers are better able than most simply to report what is happening. Because of their long involvement in Vietnam the French are exceptionally well informed about its past, its politics and culture, and about the nature of Vietnamese guerrilla warfare. Because the French government is more or less neutral about this war, correspondents and editors are under no pressure to support the war effort. French correspondents are more likely to talk to Frenchmen living in Vietnam, who next to the Vietnamese themselves know most about what is going on, and are better placed to interpret what is happening.

One of the newspapers carrying consistently good material on Vietnam is *Le Monde*. The aim of this pamphlet is to make some of this material easily available to people in Britain and the United States, and to the policy makers in both countries. This series of five articles by Robert Guillain, who has been reporting on Asian politics for twenty-five years, seemed particularly important and appropriate.

The articles have been translated in full. They speak for themselves.

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* There is a discussion of these pressures by the *New York Times* correspondent, David Halberstam, who was reporting from South Vietnam in 1963, in *The Making of a Quagmire*, The Bodley Head, London, 1965.

Saigon

IN THE STREETS of Saigon you can see hundreds of GIs. They are long-legged, broad-shouldered and crew-cut. Nearly always in civvies, with their shirts flapping outside their trousers, they stroll through the city with that slightly bored and restless air of soldiers on leave and looking for kicks.

The Vietnamese appear about three sizes smaller by the side of these white or black giants; a tiny people only there to serve them. The Americans are pulled along in pedicabs by half-naked coolies. They get their boots blacked by miniscule shoe-shine boys about ten years old. And they are piloted along by girls leading them by the hand.

The Vietnamese girls have given up their graceful tunics, their silk slippers and floating veils, and tog themselves up in tight fitting jeans to please the Americans. On the street corners the GIs talk to young spivs and pimps, who offer them girls, piastres on the black market, and the addresses of opium dens. The open-air market on the pavements of the boulevard Charner disgorges its trashy and tasteless goods - again for the benefit of the Americans. Here erotic nudes painted on silk are among the prime attractions.

The centre of the city belongs to the Americans. The rue Catinat, ironically rechristened Street of Liberty in Vietnamese, has never seen so many men with light skins and fair hair. The cafe terraces are crowded; invaded by men who all look the same. The bars - there is one every 15 to 20 yards - have Americans names like those in Chicago or Texas, and are full at all hours of the day and night.

Outside Vietnam one naturally imagines that Saigon lives in an atmosphere of war. But no-one here thinks of the war, except with hatred. They flee from it; profit from it through the giddy circulation of dollars; and mock it through a round of pleasure. From a distance one also imagines that Saigon must live in fear, in constant dread of Vietcong grenades or time bombs. But it is not at all like that. People in Saigon think only of making money and amusing themselves, at any rate when the city is not in a fever of political demonstrations. Occasionally, it is true, plastic bombs cause some damage. But, excluding a stroke of bad luck, everyone feels safe; Saigon is nothing like Algiers during the terror. Why should the Vietcong instill terror, when a disease has taken root which is destroying the system more surely from within - corruption. A

Vietnamese said to me: "In this war there is rottenness at the top: that's Saigon."

These American boys really behave quite well. They are not too quarrelsome, not very often drunk, always generous with their dollars. But there are thousands every day to spend their pay packets, to look for girls, and to transact their minor deals; for every GI creates a whole network of trade. When a flood of men, a Niagara of dollars and Himalayan volume of goods engulf a small and underdeveloped country like South Vietnam, and a people whose standards - never very rigorous - have been undermined by twenty years of war, how can one expect this country to escape corruption?

For the first few days, before I got used to the spectacle, Saigon nauseated me. Have I become too Asian in my views as a result of living for quarter of a century through the dramatic events in Asia? I am sure, at any rate, that the Japanese, Indians and Chinese who pass through Saigon must feel the same disgust. After twenty-five years of bitter struggle and revolution to ensure that Asia should belong to Asians, here suddenly in the capital of an Asian country - the focus of world attention - are all the hateful images, which they thought had vanished, of an alien and white supremacy.

PROSTITUTION

Saigon is oppressed as it never was under the French, suffering a severer occupation than Japan after its defeat, and more immoral than Tokyo during the Korean War. The Whites are masters in the city. The *compradores* (the local businessmen who collaborate with the occupation) have returned. So have the puppet governments, the Vietnamese begging in the streets, and the girls who sell themselves . . . Surely the Americans must see how shocking this spectacle is; and in the twentieth or twenty-fifth year of decolonisation, they must surely fear the judgment of the "third world." Don't they understand what weapons they put into the hands of their enemies, when the Vietcong can say: "Look at Saigon, it's just a brothel and a sink of corruption"?

The biggest industry in Saigon today is prostitution. During their other war, in Korea, the Americans were boycotted by the Korean girls. The GIs in Vietnam are much luckier. The girls in Saigon can scarcely resist their youth and their dollars. The peasant girls, who have fled from the rice fields, resist them even less. The bars where there are girls make a fortune. New bars are opening up all the time, though they have to pay secret bribes, which can amount to a million piastres.

In the bars, with the aid of discreet lighting, jazz and whisky, the GI finds what he is looking for. The rest takes place elsewhere: sometimes in the hotels, including the most expensive and well known; sometimes in the thousands of rooms rented out by the day, or by the hour. There are countless Vietnamese who have converted a part of their houses for this purpose. Or again, in the sprawling camps of straw huts and cabins which spring up along the edge of American camps, and along the main roads out of Saigon to Tu-Duc, Bien-Hoa, and Mytho.

To work with the Americans, or simply to live near them, is the ideal of thousands of Vietnamese. They are not pro-American - just pro-dollar. Money simply tumbles out of the pockets of these GIs. Near them one has access to all sorts of goods, and to all the gadgets. The American army imports everything, even the paper bags marked " made in the USA." To come in contact with the army is to come in contact with the miraculous PX - or army stores - and to enter into the vast rackets which surround it.

These rackets take two forms. First, hundreds of GIs resell on the black market all kinds of purchases which they have made at the PX for this purpose. Secondly, hundreds of tons of goods, destined for the army stores, disappear regularly between the docks and warehouse in the city, just over a mile away. Whole lorries get lost en route by magic. Everyone knows that this can't happen without a vast network of accomplices, who must stretch from the Vietnamese customs officers, drivers and guards - who from time to time get caught - up to important departments in the American army.

The stolen goods reappear in the huge open-air market which sprawls along the pavements, or in shops throughout the city. You can find everything under the sun there, from tinned foods to rare goods marked " not for sale commercially." Nor is it only PX goods which disappear. A certain " thieves' market " in the city specialises in selling brand new American uniforms. If you want to buy American arms, it is easy to get the address.

RACKETS

Another lucrative racket is building and letting apartments. It is necessary to pay all kinds of bribes to get the building materials, but the rich Vietnamese build villa after villa, paying off the cost in two years. They demand up to 800 dollars for the lease, knowing that their American tenants will always pay, even if it means being four to a villa and dividing the rent. The Chinese of Cholon build large apartments of eight to ten stories, profiting from the cement racket, which is their monopoly. But what isn't one of their rackets? They deal in shell cases, scrap iron from the battlefield, and old tins which, when flattened, provide sheet metal for the huts of refugees. The Vietnamese vie with them - in importing cars and scooters, in pharmaceutical goods, and in selling exemptions from military service, and so on. Vietnamese, Chinese, and Americans - in fact everyone - rapidly become involved in one major racket: exchanging dollars for piastres. There are at least three known prices for the dollar: the official rate, the military rate which is over double, and the black market rate which is more than three times as much. There are always, as everyone knows, people who have access to several rates, and who make their fortune from clandestine currency deals.

Many officials, even those of very high rank, play a large part in these rackets. In a regime which pays its officials a derisory salary (a maximum of roughly £40 a month) it is practically a foregone conclusion that they pay themselves out of government funds.

" The mardarin also used to pay himself, but over a lifetime," a

Vietnamese told me, "a minister of Tonton Diem over ten years, a minister of today in a year!" Baksheesh is indispensable on all sorts of occasions, and is demanded especially from the Americans. Officials make a fortune. Customs officers buy a Mercedes. Colonels build themselves villas.

Because embezzlement does not stop short at the South Vietnamese army, this is one of its maladies, in all ranks. The government soldier loots the villages during an operation. His superior officer serves two meals to his recruits, instead of the statutory three, and pockets the difference. When a general or colonel is perfectly honest - and many are - often his wife engages actively in racketeering, like the one who had cement brought by military aircraft to build her villa.

The main reason for all these practices is simple: to escape from insecurity. The war has lasted 20 years. Death may come tomorrow - or ruin, or communism. To escape the war, and cling to something solid, has become a despairing reflex action and the haunting preoccupation of thousands of Vietnamese. Security, for many, lies in piastres, or better still in dollars or a Swiss bank account. For others French culture is a form of escape, or a villa on the Cote d'Azur. Oh, to leave for France, go to live in Paris, and never to return! Better to desert a country which has become uninhabitable. If only one could . . .

Meanwhile, even the profits from these dubious transactions are eaten up by inflation. Runaway inflation coincided with the massive build-up of American troops and inrush of dollars. Prices increased fifty-five per cent in 1965, and the upward spiral continues, as a result of the flood of money and the scarcity of goods. The Vietcong understand very well how to worsen the situation by economic warfare. They cut off Saigon's provisions of rice, milk, pigs, and charcoal.

It must be noted - it is important - that not everyone suffers from inflation and economic upheaval, far from it. The Americans bring work to many poor people, and the rackets are profitable. In the slums there is sometimes more money than ever before: the father has been made a coolie for the Americans, the son a "shoe-shine" boy, and the daughter a prostitute.

Those who suffer most are the honest officials (there are some) and the little men on fixed incomes; especially teachers, intellectuals and students, when they are studying. Many are in a tragic position. The civil servant becomes a pedicab driver after office hours. (I know of two such cases.) The professor drives a taxi in his spare time.

An ancient civilisation is collapsing. The United States, which has come to defend order in this country, is itself making a powerful contribution to the general disorder. The state is corrupt, the family broken up, the social order disintegrating.

"Confucian society had four classes," a Vietnamese told me. "The Mandarins were the most respected. Today a satirical verse, which is very popular, also lists four classes, in order of their power and the respect in which they are held: prostitutes, pedicab drivers, the Chinese, and the generals." He added: "Nevertheless, this changes very quickly. Six months ago, the generals were on top."

The Vietcong in the towns

A FRENCHMAN from Hue, who used sometimes to venture into a district where the activities of the Vietcong had undermined Government control, once had the disagreeable experience of being stopped by a uniformed "Viet" officer, who suddenly appeared from nowhere. The officer threatened to take him prisoner, but in the end released him after giving him a long lecture on the political aims of the National Liberation Front. A few weeks later the Frenchman was astounded to see the very same man at an official function, now in civilian dress in the midst of Government officials!

Another example of the NLF's strength was given to me by a Vietnamese teacher:

> "The authorities insist that our students should help the peasants get in the harvest. As if by chance, the villagers who were working with them in the paddy fields revealed to the students that they belonged to the Resistance. Now some of the students bicycle into the country every Sunday to meet the Vietcong."

Finally, a story from the Northern Province of Quangtrai. The Governor's right hand man was the commander of the provincial militia. He had once been a Vietminh but was now a convert to the anti Communist forces. This man was party to all the Governor's problems, accompanied him everywhere, and was very much in the public eye, with all the prestige of being a reformed Communist. One day, after six years in office, he disappeared, his mission accomplished; he was a "Viet."

The French in Vietnam who know the country best, particularly those who experienced the Indo-China War, interpret the present situation in a way which, at first, I thought was unnecessarily pessimistic. But gradually I became aware of more and more evidence that convinced me that their version is probably the closest to reality. They consider, quite simply, that South Vietnam is already more than half conquered, but by an invisible army in the regions apparently under the control of the Americans. The Vietcong have already infiltrated the administrative system at all levels. They have supporters in the police, in the army, and, no doubt, also in the Government. Certainly they are everywhere among the people.

What really astonishes the French is the fact that the Americans,

with only a few exceptions, do not want to see how far this political disintegration has gone. With no experience of Vietnam, and lacking subtlety in their analysis of the political situation, they see everything in terms of black and white. On one side, in full view, are the "good" Vietnamese who work for them and must, therefore, be their friends. On the other side the "baddies," who are not to be seen, because they are either hiding in the jungle or involved in secret activities. They do not suspect, and indeed it is apparently beyond their comprehension, that the "good" and the "bad" are frequently the same men, and that the Vietcong are there underneath their noses.

INFILTRATION

But an essential characteristic of the Vietnamese situation is the Vietcong's penetration of the Government system. The Vietcong have realised that it is in their interest not to create parallel organisations, but to establish themselves in the official system, and to undermine it from within.

The supply problems of the Vietcong are being solved - by the arrival of American boats. They get their arms from the Vietnamese army, their funds from the money circulating in Saigon, and even their police are drawn from the ranks of the Government police. Their military intelligence comes largely from members of the Government forces.

Appearances, therefore, are deceptive; a mere facade. Traffic flows on the Saigon river. Not because the Vietcong lack the power to block it - only one boat would be needed - but because such an action would harm themselves. Hue's metalled bridge has not been mined because it is useful to the "Viets." Communications have been left open where it is temporarily more convenient to allow travellers and trade along them. Both can be taxed. Not far from Saigon, by a French plantation, uniformed guerrillas have been openly collecting their toll from exactly the same place for months. It is widely known that the same thing happens on the road to Dalat. At Kilometre 138 the Vietcong have a proper customs post where they give receipts in return for the taxes they collect. About 5,000 people pass through the post every day, plus all Saigon's vegetable supply. It is estimated that the daily taking must be more than 700,000 piastres.

Often a Government army patrol, which might put a stop to these proceedings, is close by; only half a mile away in the case of the plantation previously mentioned. But the garrison does not move, for here, as in many other places, the army and the Vietcong have come to terms. This frequently happens with the South Vietnamese "popular force" of badly paid soldiers (they only earn about five pounds a month) who man the defence posts of the fortified villages. When the "Viets" are nearby they look the other way. In return they are left in peace. For the moment.

It is estimated, by a Vietnamese source, that about ten per cent of the regular army are Vietcong, and this is probably an underestimate. Even the highest ranks have been infiltrated. There is evidence that

under Khanh's regime two Vietcong were discovered in the highest council of the army. They were imprisoned without any fuss being made, and for six months they were forgotten, only to be released - as model prisoners! And there are other amusing examples of collusion. In Saigon there are secret offices, which issue safe conducts to Government soldiers wanting to spend their leave with their families, who live in villages in areas controlled by the "Viets."

The administration is deeply infiltrated. Moreover the Vietnamese authorities have few illusions on this subject. One of Ky's ministers, after a good dinner, made this startling statement:

> "What would you have me do? Forty per cent of the personnel in my department are Vietcong."

Elsewhere a senior official gave me this example about the railways. It is impossible to run a train service, not only because guerrillas mine the tracks (on average twenty bridges in the network are blown up each day), but also because the railwaymen, their friends, help them to blow up the trains. Through them, the Vietcong know how the convoy has been arranged, and therefore, instead of blowing up the trucks haphazardly, they can attack the armoured trucks meant to protect the convoy. Even if the order of the trucks is changed at the last moment, the saboteurs all along the line are immediately informed, and place their mines accordingly.

The influence of the Vietcong in the towns is a big worry for the Americans, who are in a constant state of alert. The recent riots must have finally enlightened them, for these were certainly intensified by the presence of Vietcong agents. In February it was estimated that there were 4,000 Vietcong cells in Saigon, organised on the basis of five men to a cell. These 20,000 men are both agitators and armed soldiers, comprising the equal of one division stationed in the capital. It is thought there has been a second infiltration in Gia-Dinh, an extension of Saigon.

COLLUSION

Well informed observers, who are not American, say that the Vietcong infiltration of the administration in Hue is so complete, that no decision in the town is made without their knowledge; or indeed their agreement. Their agents, working as Government officials, give the Vietcong the power of veto over any measure unfavourable to their cause.

The mass of the population, who are constantly in contact with the secret Government, mostly co-operate, though often through fear rather than conviction. A pedicab driver in Saigon made friends with a journalist colleague of mine, not an American, who employed him every day. One day he invited the journalist to his home. It was in a slum quarter and the family was very poor. But in a corner of the hovel the "Vietcong tax" had been put on one side: it was a glass filled with uncooked rice. The driver explained that an agent would come that night to collect it.

The people are above all very apathetic about the war, and refuse to take part. This general apathy is obviously an advantage to the

Vietcong. For the townspeople at least (the different and tragic situation of the peasantry will be discussed later) it is a war waged over their heads by madmen. Their chief concern is to avoid it and live their lives with the minimum of dislocation. But this is only possible with the acquiescence of the Vietcong. In any town beseiged by the Vietcong, and all of them are, you can see every day crowds of people in buses with literally horrifying destinations: districts controlled by the enemy. Any government official who got into the vehicle would be assassinated at the first post; an American would be cut to pieces within a mile or so. But the general public have the right to pass through, and this in itself is a form of collusion with the "Viets."

Faced with this universal conspiracy, you would think that the Americans would surround themselves with extreme precautions, not only for their physical safety, but to protect themselves from spies and agents. But in fact they do not. Frenchmen, who experienced this sort of thing during the Indo-Chinese war, are utterly astonished to see how careless the Americans are in allowing themselves to be tricked and betrayed.

SECURITY LOOPHOLES

Their bases, camps and offices are full of Vietnamese employees: secretaries and telephonists; scores of "boys" and mess servants who work for both officers and men; girls who make the beds and do the washing and so have access to the sleeping quarters; chauffeurs, watchmen, hairdressers and cooks. The Vietcong have plenty of choice in recruiting their informers.

Large bases like Da Nang employ an incredible number of Vietnames coolies. There were about 5,000 Vietnamese, mostly women, at Anke when I was staying there. I was told that, when the numbers were checked, often they found there were a dozen or so more than had been employed. I remember how at an airfield a coolie, forgotten and self-effacing in the shadows, was watching carefully everything that was going on. I am sure that in his head, which resembled that of a Japanese colonel, he was registering everything that was going on, as well as the comings and goings on the airstrip.

And then there are the beautiful and indispensable almond-eyed girl friends. Almost everyone has one, from the staff officer to the senior official in non-military service. There is no attempt to hide them. Indeed quite the opposite; they are invited to cocktail parties, where they are presented to friends by the American names with which they have already been dubbed: Suzy, Betty or Polly. They are a marvellous discovery, a delightful contrast to the American women: tiny, silent, pretty, docile and willowy. The wives are not here, since the families have been evacuated. Puritanical America, which would not believe its eyes, is far away. But while these men wonder at the speed with which their protegées learn English, they do not seem to realise that inevitably the girls will be contacted, if they have not been already, by the Vietcong, who need only say to them: "What are you doing for your country? Work with us, or else . . ."

Vietnam: the second colonial occupation

AMERICAN CIVILIANS IN Cantho, capital of the Delta, which is surrounded by the Vietcong, told me how they carry on with their courageous work in spite of the danger. They were from the US aid team - the aid being directed to civilian pacification. These men said to me:

> "Our first rule is: no direct administration. We don't want the Vietnamese to say that the Americans brought them this school or that hospital. They must be able to say that the Vietnamese government built it. South Vietnam is an independent country. We are only advisers."

The Americans repeat the claim that South Vietnam is independent more frequently than they claim anything else. After all, what have they come for, if not to defend that independence? But one of the tragedies of this war is the gap that exists here, as in so many cases, between good intentions and harsh reality. Moreover the Americans frequently contradict themselves on this fundamental question. In Cantho I deliberately let the conversation pass on to other issues. Then a bit later on I asked: "And how much does American aid represent in the country's budget?" They replied, "About 80%, we pay the bill."

This is the reality. This ruined and exhausted country only exists on American aid. The defence of its independence has made the country in other ways more dependent than ever. Its independence is only a facade, for Vietnam is crushed under a foreign occupation; it has become a colony or protectorate again. The American Embassy, with its enormous staff and numerous departments, and protected by its barbed wire and guards, enjoys more authority than the South Vietnamese government. Mr Cabot Lodge is as powerful as any French Governor-General in the good old days, and "our" Bao Dai had more power than Ky and his Directory of generals.

South Vietnam's dependence is particularly striking in economic and financial matters. As they said in Cantho, the country only survives with the help of American subsidies. These are ever increasing: 300 million dollars in 1965, 600 million in 1966. Without this support there would be chaos, and probably famine. There is a significant paradox in the fact that today the Americans send 400 million tons of rice a year to this country, which recently used to export rice.

Firstly, the "blood transfusion" of American aid takes the form of

supplies of goods. There is little else for the country to buy. For the most part they are American goods, bought by the United States government. This represents 300 million dollars a year. The goods arrive in American boats; it is in fact a monopoly for the American ship-owners who have made a fortune out of the war.

Then there is the second category of American aid, the sale of American agricultural supplies, including cotton, to South Vietnam. This amounts to 70 million dollars, which, through the juggling of counterpart funds, helps to finance the third category of aid, underwriting military expenses of the Saigon government, as well as certain civilian expenses.

The fourth category of aid is helping numerous Vietnamese "projects," as they are called by the Americans. These projects involve anything and everything in the administration and the economy: police, hospitals, setting up or expanding factories and workshops, agricultural equipment, importing manure, building roads, equipment for schools, etc. It is difficult to assess the total costs with any accuracy, for they are listed under at least 300 headings, but it must come close to 300 million dollars a year.

Personnel follow the flow of goods. Under the fifth and last category of aid, the Americans have brought in all kinds of experts; agriculturalists, bankers, specialists in telecommunications, accountants, customs officers, police, industrialists and economists. Their help is useful to the Vietnamese when they show them how to put their administration and businesses in order, and how to modernise and expand them. But these experts are led to gear Vietnamese activities in every sphere to American aims, and to conscript everything to the service of American military requirements.

CORRUPTION

In deference to the fiction of independence, at least two rules are applied. All those American civilians, who are to be found in every field of activity and even in the remotest provinces, theoretically only act as advisers, and are not in charge. In the case of the supplies, all deliveries become Vietnamese government property on arrival. It is the responsibility of the Vietnamese to transport and distribute them without American interference.

This system has unfortunately proved very unsuccessful in practice. It has left the way wide open for embezzlement, which is practised by a great number of Vietnamese civil servants - often with the complicity of the Americans. It has also made for general incompetence. A large proportion of the supplies never reach the people for whom they are intended. The goods and money are kept by the officials. There are hundreds of examples. One frequently quoted is how the medical supplies destined for the camp at Pleime, when it was involved in fierce fighting, landed up instead in the black market at Pleiku, the capital of the province.

A new director of aid, whose two predecessors proved to be inefficient, is attempting to straighten matters out at the moment by imposing American control. For this he needs double the number of

personnel, American counter-signatures on every document signed by a Vietnamese official, and an American on the spot when aid is distrbuted. The Vietnamese official's lack of efficiency and honesty has led the Americans, little by little, to practise direct administration in a more or less disguised fashion, and to take over wider areas of the administration and of the economy. They would like to follow suit in the military field.

The American command is obliged to take great precautions to maintain the fiction of the Vietnamese army's independence. They are forbidden to introduce, for example, a single unified command - i.e. an Americon one - as they would like to do. They must always mount joint operations, which means working out plans with the Vietnamese chiefs of staff whenever troops under their command take part.

FALSE INDEPENDENCE

It is nevertheless quite obvious in the military sphere that South Vietnam is a protectorate, and that the Vietnamese army is a mercenary army. It depends almost entirely on the Americans for its equipment, munitions, fuel and pay. During operations it can seldom do without the protection of American aircraft and artillery, and more often than not relies also on American transport planes and helicopters. A South Vietnamese general cannot undertake an operation on his own initiative, if the Americans refuse him their support.

In three out of four army corps, the American forces are so predominant, and their bases so huge, that the war is almost entirely an American war, in spite of the presence of important South Vietnamese forces. This is the situation throughout central Vietnam. The strategy of relying on intensive air bombardment and on helicopters is dictated by the Americans; and they have the responsibility of initiating all operations. Only in the Delta are they willing to restrict themselves to having advisers with the Vietnamese forces; and they would like to change the position here, and have their own troops in the Delta as well.

The building of enormous American installations makes " independence " a meaningless word. One very important aspect of this enterprise is hardly known outside Vietnam: that is the excessive part now played in South Vietnam by the American company which has obtained a monopoly of the public works in the country. The four largest construction companies in the United States have clubbed together and created " Vietnam Builders." This is a new power in Vietnam, alongside the other powerful and often competing American governmental departments - the State Department, CIA, US aid, the Army and so on. Its construction programme surpasses the famous Manhattan project, which created the atomic bomb.

A hundred construction projects in over 30 localities will completely transform the economic structure of South Vietnam. They employ now 25,000 Vietnamese, 1,700 foreigners and 1,800 Americans. But these figures will reach 50,000, 8,000 and 5,500 respectively. The cost of these works is expected to be 240 million dollars in 1966: 97

million for labour works; 72 million for air strips; and 47 million for military installations and camps.

The arrival of the American forces has already resulted in many Vietnamese men and women being attracted to work for the Americans. The monstrous growth of Vietnam Builders makes the social and economic upheaval worse. First of all it means a revolution in earnings, which speeds up inflation. The Vietnamese worker can earn up to five or six times his usual wage, especially if he is skilled. The last of the poor whites, with French or foreign passports, are sure of earning up to 500 dollars a month just for supervising the dockers unloading. Phillipines and Koreans come over in the hope of getting a slice of the cake. As for the Americans, the lowest salary they earn is around 1,000 dollars a month.

These fabulous jobs have a powerful attraction for the Vietnamese. If 50,000 more workers go to get jobs with the Americans, there will be no-one left to work for Vietnam itself. This disastrous siphoning off of labour is going on now. The hevea plantations, for instance, already badly hit, are losing a large number of their workmen. Workers and civil servants are leaving their firms and ministries. Recently one minister was tearing his hair out: he had only four office boys in his whole department.

PERMANENT OCCUPATION

Is the total dependence of South Vietnam on the Americans a passing phenomenon which will gradually disappear after the end of the war and the reconstruction of the country, as it did in Japan and Korea? The Vietnamese are sceptical. In fact many have given up all hope about the future. They think the Vietcong will never surrender. If the United States relax their grip, the Vietcong will immediately strengthen their own. South Vietnam feels condemned to a kind of permanent occupation which in turn strengthens the resistance; it is a vicious circle.

The long term views expressed by the Americans can hardly dispel these fears.

"If necessary, we shall stay here 20 years, as we have in Berlin," Ambassador Porter told me, Numerous Americans gave me the same estimates: 10, 15 or 20 years. Vietnamese are constantly being told the same thing: "We shall stay as long as necessary." The importance of the American bases seems to confirm these statements. One persistent rumour in Saigon asserts that General Ky has given the Americans the base at Canranh for 99 years. The immense works being undertaken there, which should make it one of the largest naval bases in the world, suggest this rumour may be true.

This overwhelming foreign presence in the country is deeply resented by those South Vietnamese still capable of feeling. This sense of anguish is, together with Vietcong propaganda, a powerful source of that anti-American feeling which the recent disturbances demonstrated so strongly.

Bombing the villages

AS I WRITE this article vivid memories come back to me of a boy in a hospital in central Vietnam, showing the terrible stumps where his feet had been burnt by napalm; a little girl of eleven at Cantho, her face equally disfigured by napalm; peasants at a hospital in Hue, all of them maimed and lacerated by bombs, shells, rockets, mines or bullets; a peasant woman weeping over the bloodstained body of her husband at the roadside; and those peasants, who after an attack, walked towards the marines, mutely showing them the small corpses of their children.

At Hue a seriously wounded old man was taken into the hospital on his son's back. According to the nurses the young man laid his father on a bed, and on his way out turned to them and said:

> "Look after him. I will come back after the war. You will be expected to give a good account."

He was a "Viet." I was struck by his words. It seemed that I too should give a good account.

The question of how many civilian victims there have been in this war in South Vietnam is extremely difficult to answer. Firstly, the Americans and the Vietnamese discuss casualties as little as possible, and if they have statistics, they must be very inaccurate. Secondly, it is difficult to go and see for oneself. The vast areas controlled by the Vietcong are inaccessible, but these are the most frequently bombed. Almost all the remaining countryside is "contested." Only the troops who see what is going on could tell the story. In fact official communiqués refer only to "Vietcong" losses. There is not a whisper of civilian casualties. This proves either that the "Vietcong" figures are inflated by the inclusion of the number of civilian dead, or that there is a tacit silence concerning casualties suffered by the peasantry.

But one of the striking features of this war is that the most devastating fire-power is used in operations on numerous ill-defined fronts, whilst all the peasants, often hostile to both sides at once, but clinging desperately to their rice fields, find themselves caught in the cross-fire. I have only been able to collect fragmentary and often contradictory information, but at least it throws some light on the course of this tragedy.

According to a very reliable source, during one week of October 1965, when there were many clashes, there were more than 700 civilians wounded in the province of Hue. In a month there would be more than three thousand. Further statistics show that during the same period the hospital at Hue was admitting about a hundred casualties each month, and about one thousand during 1965. This

figure is small in comparison with the former. This can be explained by the fact that those admitted to hospital represent only a small proportion of the total number of casualties, since only those villagers who live fairly close to the hospital can hope to be taken to it. Therefore eighty or ninety per cent of those hurt never reach the hospital, but they are left wherever they were wounded.

At Da Nang (ex-Tourane), during the early months of 1966, between 100 and 150 wounded civilians were admitted to the hospital each month. At Cantho in the Delta the civilian hospital gave me the much more alarming figure of twenty admissions a day, making 600 a month. In Saigon the figures were even higher; there are between fifty to eighty civilian casualties admitted each day in the four hospitals. Moreover these figures do not include admissions to the children's hospital. Thus during one month the total of those admitted to hospital would be between 1,500 and 2,400.

A French doctor in Saigon said to me:

> "Many of the wounded die on the way to hospital. We have many who were wounded by mortar fire, partly by Vietcong mortars. There are many, including children, who have been badly burned by napalm and phosphorous. Whole families are wiped out. The other day a pregnant woman with a shattered arm was the sole survivor of an entire family. American soldiers are constantly bringing into the military hospital Vietnamese children, whom they have picked up during an operation: the children were orphaned the same day the soldiers took pity on them."

What about the deaths amongst the civilian population? Frankly I have no reliable figures, but Clement Zablocki, senator for Wisconsin, has recently worked out that at a rough estimate for every Vietcong killed there are two civilian deaths. Calculating on this basis, if we can believe the American figure of approximately 36,000 Vietcong killed in 1965, the number of civilian dead in that year was 72,000. With all due caution I am tempted to believe that this number is smaller than the reality.

It seems that the beginning of the American build-up in the summer of 1965 led to particularly heavy losses among the civilian population. Several American journalists were utterly appalled. One of them said to me, "this war has turned us into pacifists." Let me quote some of their reports. In June, near Quang-Ngai in Central Vietnam, many villages were systematically wiped out from the air and by gunfire, and very many villagers were killed. In August, near Da Nang, villages were set on fire by flame-throwers as a reprisal against snipers. In the autumn on the plain near Pleiku, villages which were officially "evacuated" were bombed; in fact some Montagnards were still living in them. In the contested area around Dukko and Le Than all the villages were completely destroyed by napalm, bombs and artillery. At the end of the year there were innumerable indiscriminate bombardments and shooting incidents in the Mekong Delta.

The American command has reacted by making an effort to suppress abuses. A list of bombing targets has been drawn up. "Air controllers" accompany the bombers during raids. All air strikes must previously be approved by the Provincial Governor, who checks whether, according to his information the objective is actually in the hands of the enemy. But in the heat of battle, and fighting has

become even more violent in these last months, these precautions are often illusory. The Provincial Governor is a Vietnamese, sitting in an office a long way away, where he has a thousand other things to do. The mistakes and abuses in the bombing still occur, as any one who makes inquiries about it will be told.

A village had been bombarded on the strength of information forty-eight hours old. Another was wrongly classified as a Vietcong village when it was not, because shelters and tunnels had been seen there. But how many villagers nowadays do not spend a part of their time in dug-outs? In one contested area leaflets were dropped ordering: "Evacuate the area, in three days we will bomb it." Three days later everything was burned up with incendiary bombs. But the villagers had stayed in their houses. A convoy of sampans on the river was machine-gunned because it was thought to be carrying rice; it was a peasant wedding, a procession of guests going by boat. But how can the pilot in his supersonic plane, coming from the other ends of the earth and completely ignorant of the country he is flying over, while equipped with formidably powerful weapons, distinguish for certain between friend and foe? Presuming any friends are left.

DESTRUCTION

An attack can burst upon one quite unexpectedly; in an open paddyfield full of people it comes without warning out of the blue, as the battle suddenly shifts, splattering everything in the vicinity. Here come a flight of Super-Sabre jets at over 600 mph, which in a few minutes will each have dropped more than a ton of bombs, peppering the target with rockets and 20 mm cannon. At this speed an error in timing of a few seconds can mean that anything may get hit. Here are villages with the peasants in the fields. Friends, enemies, who knows? But the Vietcong are in one corner. Suddenly there is an air strike by naval bombers lasting fifteen minutes; then the helicopters each unleashing their rockets for ten minutes; then come the artillery helicopters with their heavy guns and rockets. So in half an hour the "landing zone" is softened up, and 2,500 soldiers on board seventy-five helicopters fall from the sky onto a stretch of Vietnamese countryside. For the peasants caught in the battle it is *sauve qui peut*.

While the number of civilian dead increase, material destruction stretches, day after day, across the countryside. Oddly enough the Americans give figures for this in their daily bulletins. There is a tragic and monotonous census of the "structures" destroyed. The buildings described in this way are often mostly villagers' houses, farms and shacks in the rice fields. I have noted the following typical statistics: February 12, 420 structures destroyed in South Vietnam and 400 damaged, 200 and 300 of these respectively being in the Delta; February 13, 320 destroyed and 280 damaged, of which 161 and 176 were in the Delta; February 14, 530 destroyed and 360 damaged, 280 and 220 respectively in the Delta, always a main target. It should be understood that these figures refer only to enemy

structures in the zone controlled by the Vietcong. But who has ever compiled complete statistics or can number all the buildings which are burnt or destroyed in the so-called "contested" areas, on the innumerable and constantly changing fronts, or on the uncertain frontiers of the zones classified "friendly"?

The evacuation of these contested areas is one of the objectives of American policy, in order to leave the way clear for the war, and for unrestricted attacks. The rural population whom I spoke of earlier, who have clung to their villages, obstinately refusing to take sides, and gone on living between the two sides killing each other, are no longer going to be allowed to hang on in these areas. An American spokesman explained this to me with disconcerting frankness:

> "There have been three choices open to the peasantry. One, to stay where they are; two, to move into the areas controlled by us; three, to move off into the interior towards the Vietcong. The application of our air power since February has made the first choice impossible from now on. It is not possible to stay in the line of fire and live."

This spokesman became even more precise.

> "Our operations have been designed to make the first choice impossible, the second attractive, and to reduce the liklihood of anyone choosing the third to zero. How many among the peasants forced to move opt for the third course? We believe the numbers are minimal. To go to the Vietcong is to continue the war. The peasants are seeking shelter from the war. The great majority make the second choice, they come over to our side."

The result of all this - 850,000 South Vietnamese refugees. They are particularly numerous in the provinces bordering on central Vietnam, near the large American bases of Qui Nhon, Anke, Pleiku and so on, and in the interior in the provinces of Kontum and of Ban-Me-Thuot. A considerable number of refugees, close on half a million, have been collected into over 230 camps. The rest, according to official statistics, have in the great majority of cases been "resettled," that is re-housed and established in a friendly area under the care of the South Vietnamese authorities.

In fact the figure for those "resettled" is grossly exaggerated. It is really an estimate of refugees supposed to receive, thanks to American aid, certain kinds of help in the form of blankets, money, building materials, and six months' supply of rice. Therefore many local officials in the South Vietnamese administration, often military personnel, take part in the "refugee racket." They produce inflated figures for fictitious resettlements, so they can appropriate the corresponding goods, or else reserve for their own benefit part of the aid . . .

Thousands of refugees, left to fend for themselves, settle themselves as best they can. You can see them everywhere building their huts. They huddle together in new villages, and overrun the smallest empty space left in the towns. Small market towns like Pleiku have undergone a mushroom growth. The outskirts of Saigon see the numbers of straw huts multiplying. Shanty towns grow up round the large American bases, and are centres of prostitution and of a thousand minor rackets. Refugees have created an interminable ribbon development of buildings by the rice fields along the safer roads. All this constitutes an excellent jumping-off ground for the Vietcong, who have their agents among these uprooted people.

Stalemate or escalation?

A FRENCH PLANTER, taken prisoner in the jungle by the Vietcong, was interrogated day after day by a political cadre. But the cadre suffered from such violent bouts of malaria that he often had to interrupt his questioning, because he was shaking so much with fever. Eventually the planter was released. Taking leave of the cadre, he wanted to leave him a large bottle of quinine which he had with him. But the cadre, so he relates, answered with fierce pride, "Keep your bottle, Monsieur, the people's army does not need gifts; it has all the remedies it needs."

A French missionary, who was also captured, reports how the personality of one of the guerrilla leaders he met moved him at once to admiration and fear. One day, he asked him in Vietnamese: "Where do you come from, where is your home?" The other replied: "I have fought in the jungle for twenty years. I have no home, no village, no family and no country. My country is the revolution."

These two curiously parallel anecdotes seem to me to illustrate a very important aspect of this war, one which will undoubtedly never figure in the calculations of the American computers, but may nevertheless be decisive: the incredible Asiatic capacity for suffering and resistance. And the Vietnamese are even stronger than the Japanese and the Chinese. With the help of uncompromising determination, and an obstinate patriotic faith, their capacity for suffering reaches unprecedented heights. The North Vietnamese and the guerrillas belong to the same race as the people of Saigon, certainly; but Marxism and war have enhanced their will towards self- sacrifice.

It is still believed abroad that the Chinese are unrivalled in popular warfare. This is no longer true. Today the Chinese can take lessons from the North Vietnamese, and the North Vietnamese from those of the South. The Vietcong fighter, who sticks it out and continues to fight under hellish American bombardment, has rarely been equalled in history.

Look also at the Vietnamese gift for strategem, bluff, and, where necessary, double-crossing and cheating. Really the Americans do not know what kind of country they have ventured into. The longer the war and the American presence lasts, the more they risk an uprising by the entire population. For the war and the GIs create more resistance daily than all the propaganda of Hanoi and Peking. The Americans can crush the country with their bombs, but they will be unable to hold it even if it is conquered.

We must not go on making the error of underestimating American

strength in Vietnam. It is tremendous, and has not yet reached its limit. Bases are still expanding, and an effective force of 255,000 is due to be increased to 400,000. In the sphere of conventional arms - the use of atomic weapons apparently being ruled out - the Americans can go on building up their already formidable fire-power, particularly in the air. Therefore the question arises, whether they will not be tempted to go very much further than at present in stepping up the violence of a war " to the finish."

How far have they progressed in a year? " We can no longer lose this war," one of their generals told me. " It is going well," said another. He was speaking in military terms only, for the political situation is a different matter. Militarily at least the Vietcong are hard pressed. They no longer have completely secure communication lines, and have had to abandon large scale actions, in which bombs can be used against them. Their losses have increased. All this is true, and yet in many respects American military success appears limited and too slow.

UNENDING WAR

Should the Americans attack the Vietcong on the ground? For that they must be pinned down and forced to accept battle, which they do very rarely. Hundreds of times they have managed to break off an engagement, and even more often they have avoided making contact in the first place.

So, should territory be occupied to prevent their return there? " To occupy South Vietnam after we have cleared them out, we should need fifty divisions," an American expert in Saigon told me. At present they have fifteen, and have only managed to impose an occupation in very restricted areas. Everywhere else troops patrol the country, but do not stay there, and the Vietcong return. To give one example. At the end of March, I watched the success of Operation Utah to the south of Da Nang. This put the Americans " in control," as they claimed, of the whole of a good rice growing district. How should they follow it up? Occupy the district? Impossible because of lack of troops. Hand it over to the Vietnamese? They have not attempted more than that. Occupation is only worthwhile, in fact, if it inaugurates pacification, that is, the establishment in rural areas of administrative machinery and civilian government personnel, which they do not have. Their few civilian " cadres " are already insufficient for existing areas. So in the end, the peasants watched their " liberators " depart, and the Vietcong returned to the devastated villages.

Is there a third course? Should they attack the Vietcong through a war of attrition? In fact, all operations in the past six months have been restricted to this, whether they have taken the form of bombing the North, or patrolling, as well as bombing, in the South. In the North the damage is certainly considerable; but - a serious defeat for Washington - the morale of Hanoi has not been broken. The bombing has hardened, not weakened, the will to resist, and provoked the North into providing more aid for the South rather than preventing it. More than 5,000 North Vietnamese infiltrate the

South each month, according to the Americans. This is three times more than in the autumn, proof that bombing the Ho Chi Minh trail has had little effect.

The wear and tear suffered by the Vietcong in the South has not been any more decisive. The aim is to inflict losses at a rate they cannot sustain, but up to now they have been able to fill the gaps, and considerably reinforce their fire-power. Since the end of 1964 they have progressively armed all their fighting forces, both regular and irregular, with standardised modern weapons of the Russo-Chinese type. They too are capable of "escalation." At this very moment Saigon watches, with considerable alarm, a very great concentration of Vietcong and North Vietnamese troops just to the south of the 17th parallel. The Americans run the risk of having to face a heavy offensive during the coming monsoon months.

In short, the Vietcong have overcome their difficulties, and reinforced their guerrillas, and once again it is the civilian population who suffer the consequences. The atrocities of this war are not limited to one side; it would be unjust to ascribe them only to the Americans. For the peasants, destruction and suffering come very frequently from the Vietcong. First, from their military operations: night attacks, often fatal to the villages: mortar fire where the "Viet" are in control; and battles with light automatic weapons, with which they are abundantly provided. Next, from their political campaigns: executions, reprisals and terrorism.

Not a day passes without tragedy. Village elders and local officials are murdered, abducted and tortured: in the last three months there have been 130 killed and a hundred kidnapped. Ordinary civilians, usually simple peasants, are executed: 2,000 in 1965 and 7,000 kidnapped. A wagon carrying harvesters, in a district recently "liberated" by the government forces, hit an automatic mine, there were more than forty victims. A new school went up in flames the day after it was opened. Livestock provided by American aid are slaughtered. Vietnamese employed in the American information service are "downed": a dozen of them in the Delta since the beginning of this year.

INCREASING DANGER

The whole population, not only "collaborators," are subjected to increasingly inexorable pressure. Recruiting becomes more difficult, and the Vietcong use force more often and recruit boys of fourteen. Their levies are becoming heavier and are more often collected at gunpoint, with the execution of the recalcitrant to serve as examples.

So the war of attrition is demonstrably difficult, cruel, and maddeningly inconclusive. At night the Vietcong remain in control everywhere. Pacification proceeds slowly and is constantly being challenged. Although they have few direct encounters with the Vietcong, operations are costing the Americans more than 500 dead each month. At this rate they will need another five or six years to secure decisive results.

Not only is it doubtful whether the Americans have that much patience - their impatience is demonstrated daily - but it is more doubtful still whether the South Vietnamese have it. It seems probable

the country will either revolt against the war, and demand that their saviours go home - a danger which the Americans are actually expecting; or else that, because of the extent of destruction and decay, there will no longer be any of Vietnam left for the saviours to save.

The possibility of a new escalation, therefore, must be taken very seriously. The Americans face the temptation to escape from this deceptive kind of guerrila warfare, to replace it by modern warfare with its deadly efficiency, and to make short, sharp attacks from overwhelming strength. There are several courses which could attract them:

1. To isolate South Vietnam by cutting the peninsula in two. A pincer movement would divide it at the same time from the coast and from Thailand. The principal problem in fact is to cut the Ho Chi Minh trail. "This pipeline is our bête noire," one of the American generals told me, "As long as it remains open, the war cannot be won." But the terrain for this operation is very bad, and one would need considerable forces to hold it.

2. To invade North Vietnam. This operation has been studied by the general staff, who concluded that the ideal landing place would be Vinh, a little to the north of the 17th parallel. The occupation of this region would cut off the Ho Chi Minh trail at its source, and at the same time cut off the Pathet Lao from their rear. Today there are unceasing attacks on Vinh, which have almost destroyed it.

3. To bombard North Vietnam with even greater force. Aerial attacks, which are frequently discussed, would hit industrial installations, the port of Haiphong, perhaps Hanoi itself, or even the great dams.

4. Finally, to attack China itself, by bombing atomic stations, or new industrial plant in general. I am convinced that this possibility is completely ruled out by the Americans, at least by those in Saigon. But I very much fear that the first three possibilities are only so many rungs on a ladder, which threatens to lead them to the fourth.

Personally I believe that People's China cannot remain inactive for ever before the American escalation in Vietnam. Up till now she has been very cautious, but that caution has limits. Experts discuss where those limits lie, and the exact position of the line they must not cross. Strangely enough, it is placed farthest away by the Americans, who are so ready to accuse China of aggression: they flirt with the idea that she will act only if her own frontiers are violated.

For my part, I think that China follows a simple general rule: if North Vietnam collapses, then she will intervene.

The American dilemma is whether to remain bogged down, or to take risks. This situation, which is fraught with peril for all the world, should deeply concern us all. We are all involved in this terrible war. The whole of Asia sees that the West is continuing in its disastrous folly, that Christians are employing deadly weapons, that these weapons are massacring unarmed but courageous Asians, and that whites are killing coloured. . . .

But the dilemma must seem tragic to the Communists as well. And I wonder whether they do not have a formidable weapon in reserve: their own peace proposals. Wouldn't South Vietnam disintigrate immediately under the impact of such a bombshell?

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